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The attitudes of Mexican youngsters with respect to social limits

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Summary

The Reaction Pattern Research (RPR) was started in 1980 in the Department of Orthopedagogy of the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. It focuses on the basic patterns of the attitudes of youngsters with regard to social limits, defined as rules, laws, norms and environmental expectations, and on the connection between these attitudinal reactions and rearing at home, in the classroom or in (residential) institutions for youth care (Rink, 1999). At present, the RPR constitutes an international research program, that is being developed with the participation of universities in the Netherlands, Germany, Canada, Belgium, Mexico, Slovakia, Estonia, New Zealand and the United States. This research provides the Mexican contribution to the RPR, reporting the findings with respect to the attitude of youngsters from the city of Toluca investigated by means of the group-oriented Standard Reaction Instrument (SRI), which was designed especially for the measurement of reaction patterns of young people when dealing with social limits. The research design includes both normal youngsters (without severe behavioral problems or law contacts) and juvenile delinquents. Throughout the ten chapters, theoretical and methodological issues are addressed, the research expectations are formulated, the results are described and discussed, and the implications of the findings are presented.

Chapter 1 provides a general introduction to the RPR. Its purposes are defined as investigating youngsters' attitudes towards social limits, making cross-cultural comparisons regarding their reaction patterns and developing instruments that can be used for prevention, diagnosis and treatment in schools and youth care centers. The concept of 'attitude' is explored, from the assumption that this construct includes cognitive, affective and conative elements. In the RPR, the attitude concept is made operational through the measurement of known reactions, preferred reactions and motivations, and the assessment of the youngsters' appreciation of their living environment with respect to 13 strain, ecological and binding factors. The typology of reactions distinguishes adjusting (A), overstepping (B), negotiating (C) and retreating (D), whereas the motivations are classified as self-directed (a),

other-directed (b), here and now-oriented (c) and future-oriented (d). A description of the evolution of the RPR is given, in the Netherlands as well as in other countries. The main results of the program have led to the establishment of the so-called international, group-oriented standard picture, representing the attitudinal baggage with which groups of juveniles without behavioral problems or law contacts cope with social limits in an efficient way. On the other hand, youngsters with behavioral problems and juvenile delinquents have shown systematic deviations from this standard picture: they are more inclined to overstepping and retreating, and less inclined to adjusting and negotiating. The reasons for setting up the RPR-Mexico are related to the importance of studying the attitudes towards social limits in samples of normal and detained youngsters, in a context of growing concern about problems of (juvenile) delinquency and the increase of violence in Mexican society. In addition, the comparison between reaction patterns of Mexican juveniles and those of youngsters from other countries is interesting from a cross-cultural point of view.

Chapter 2 presents the design of the RPR-Mexico. The general research aim is defined as determining the reaction patterns of youngsters from the city of Toluca, whereas the specific aim consists of establishing the patterns of juvenile delinquents from the region, and analyzing the differences and similarities with respect to the findings for the normal group. The comparative aim concerns the international, cross-cultural comparison between both Mexican groups and similar samples in other countries. For each research aim more specific research questions were formulated. The research population includes approximately 300 schoolgoing youngsters, 50% male and 50% female, equally distributed over the age groups of 12-14, 15-16 and 17-20 years old; and 100 juvenile delinquents in the age from 12 to 20, detained in a correctional institute. A description is given of the original (Dutch) version of the SRI, a questionnaire containing four parts. The first part includes items that collect biographical data of the respondents. The core of the instrument is the second part, that actually measures the attitudes towards social limits through 10 critical incidents: fictitious situations that might occur in the everyday life of young people and that involve dealing with social limits. The respondents give their known reactions, preferred reaction and motivations on each critical incident. Part 3 and 4 assess the youngsters' appreciation of their living environment, operationalized by the satisfaction expressed with 13 binding, ecological and strain factors, and the importance attached to each factor. As the Dutch version contained certain elements that would not be recognizable or understandable for young people in the Mexican context, culturally adaptive modifications had to be made in some critical incidents, but without affecting the essence of the social limits.

The methodology of the research is addressed in *chapter 3*. First, a brief description of the demographic and socio-economic features of the research region, the city of Toluca, is given. The procedure that was followed for the normal group was based on the selection of 8 schools of different educational levels (lower high school, upper high school and university). The sample of juvenile delinquents was drawn entirely from the School of Rehabilitation for Minor 'Quinta del Bosque', as this is the only institution in the State of Mexico where youngsters convicted for committing a crime are detained. All institutions and their staff members cooperated fully in making possible the administration of the SRI. The final sample consisted of 392 subjects: 293 normal youngsters and 99 juvenile delinquents. The distribution of both groups in terms of gender, age, school type, residence, family background, religion and political preference is given. A clear difference was detected between both samples, as the living conditions of the detained youngsters proved to be much less favorable: lower educational level, larger families, more broken homes and lower professional level of the parents. The data were collected through the application of the SRI to groups of students, in the presence of teachers and staff members, based on the principles of anonymity and voluntary participation of the respondents. The data were processed according to the typology of reactions and motivations used in the RPR, and following the established agreements for coding that are included in the manual elaborated by Brons & Van Dijken (1994). The χ^2 -test and the contingency coefficient were used for data analysis, mainly for reasons of comparability with the results of previous group-oriented studies carried out by means of the SRI, all of which had also employed these statistical techniques. In the final part of the chapter, validity issues are discussed, taking into consideration the operationalization of the research questions, construct validity and the research results. The analysis of the dispersion in the distribution of the reactions and motivations by means of the Index of Qualitative Variety proposed by Reynolds (1984) produced moderate to high values on nearly all incidents, indicating that the SRI possesses sufficient discriminatory capacity.

Chapter 4 develops the theoretical foundation of the research. The point of departure is a brief analysis of the socialization process and the role of the family as a socializing agent, assuming that the family is a basic factor in young people's acquisition and formation of attitudes towards social limits. Then, some relevant aspects of family life in Mexico are described: general data, gender roles and childrearing patterns. The review of available literature and empirical studies on the subject gives rise to the image of the Mexican family as a very important social institution, with strong ties and interdependence between its members. The rearing process in most Mexican families is influenced by collectivistic cultural patterns and values, such as

obedience, respect, mutual support and responsibility, strong group norms and hierarchical authority structures between parents and children. Gender differentiation can be observed in the major degree of personal freedom and independence that is granted to sons, compared with daughters. Empirical studies on the attitudes, beliefs and opinions of Mexican adolescents provide evidence of the importance they attach to their family, and most of them also express a high degree of satisfaction with their family environment and relationships. Their perception of the socio-economic and political situation of the Mexican society as a whole is much less positive, and on some issues their appreciation is frankly negative.

Juvenile delinquency in Mexico is another relevant topic of our theoretical framework. The concept of juvenile delinquency we adopt is aimed at its understanding as a complex phenomenon that involves legal, social, psychological, economic and political aspects, involving a great variety of crime generating factors. An overview is given of the changes in legislation on the matter, both at a national level and in the State of Mexico. Current laws emphasize human rights, care and protection of detained youngsters, who are legally classified as 'minor offenders' (and not as 'juvenile delinquents'). Likewise, the institutions are not conceived as youth prisons but as schools of rehabilitation for minors who have committed an offense. In the Quinta del Bosque, the convicted youngsters are submitted to treatment, which includes education, workshops, and psychological activities oriented towards modification of attitudes and behavior. Data on minor offenders in Mexico and the Quinta del Bosque coincide on certain background characteristics, like poverty, bad performance at school, unemployment and broken homes.

The third part of the theoretical framework addresses cross-cultural aspects of the social context and family life. Contrary to most other countries that participate in the RPR, Mexico is considered to be a collectively oriented society, and so the distinction between individualism and collectivism is an important analytical tool for establishing cross-cultural comparisons. However, this distinction should not be seen as absolute or rigid; it is argued that individualistic and collectivistic practices and values co-exist in several domains of the Mexican culture, but group-oriented relationships are particularly strong in the family setting. Consequently, important differences exist between Mexico and Western societies with respect to family life, socialization patterns and the rearing process. Some reflections are also made on cross-cultural issues related to the concept of social limits. It is stated that laws, rules, norms and environmental expectations regarding (in)appropriate behavior vary among cultures: some social limits are specific to certain cultures only, and when they are shared by several cultures their strength may

vary (Grietens & Hellinckx, 1997). This means that cross-cultural variations may be expected in the way social limits are dealt with.

The research expectations of our study are formulated in *chapter 5*, based on the theoretical framework and/or the findings of RPR-projects carried out previously in other countries. The expectations regarding the general research questions concern the sample of normal schoolgoing youngsters from Toluca, covering the following aspects: the global patterns of known reactions, preferred reactions and motivations; the relation between preferred reactions and motivations; the reaction patterns per critical incident; reactions and motivations by age, gender and profession of the parents; the appreciation of the living environment; and the relation between preferred reactions and motivations and the degree of satisfaction with the living environment. Likewise, research expectations on these issues are presented for the specific questions, which are aimed at analyzing the sample of juvenile delinquents and determining similarities and differences with respect to the normal sample. The expectations on the comparative questions refer to the cross-cultural component of the RPR-Mexico, comparing both normal and detained Mexican youngsters with similar groups from other countries on their global reaction patterns; the average number of known reactions and motivations per situation; and the patterns of preferred reactions per critical incident.

The results of the general research questions are presented in *chapter 6*. The following global reaction patterns were obtained for normal youngsters: known reactions $A > B > D > C$, preferred reactions $A > B > C > D$, and motivations $c > a > b > d$. Adjusting to social limits is the best known and most preferred reaction, followed by overstepping in the second place. Negotiating and retreating are much less known and seldom chosen. The self- and here and now-directed motivations are given most frequently by the respondents for justifying their behavioral inclinations. In the relation between preferred reactions and motivations, it was observed that the motivations do not co-occur random with the preferred reactions. The incident by incident analysis yielded statistically significant differences in the distributions of known reactions, preferred reactions and motivations, meaning that the situation itself has influence on the reaction patterns. The impact of the variables gender, age and profession of the parents on the global reaction patterns was determined; the results show that the effects of these variables is absent or, at best, small. In the youngsters' appreciation of their living environment, high satisfaction scores prevail on all three aspects (binding, strain and ecological factors). A clear difference was observed in the satisfaction per living zone: on all factors, the respondents expressed the highest degree of satisfaction in the family setting, followed by the block and the neighborhood, whereas the perception of living conditions in society as a

whole was the least positive on nearly all factors. In the importance that youngsters attach to the issues related to their environment, high scores dominate on all three factor types and on all single factors. The highest priority is given to the way of dealing with problems, and the lowest average appeared on the status factor.

Chapter 7 deals with the results of the specific research questions, regarding the sample of detained youngsters. It also includes a comparison with regard to the findings for the normal group. The global reaction patterns that were obtained for the minor offenders are identical to the ones of the normal sample: known reactions $A > B > D > C$, preferred reactions $A > B > C > D$, and motivations $c > a > b > d$. Small statistically significant differences between the samples were found in the percentage distributions of known reactions and motivations, but not in the preferred reactions. The motivations vary by the type of preferred reactions that were chosen by the respondents, and the combination of retreating and future directed motivations was found more frequently in the detained youngsters than in the normal group. In the incident by incident analysis, the distribution and patterns of reactions and motivations changed according to the situation. Significant differences between normal and detained youngsters appeared on 4 incidents in both the known and preferred reactions, and on 3 incidents in the motivations. However, the contingency coefficient had a small value in nearly all cases. The influence of the variables gender, age and profession of the parents on the detained juveniles' reaction patterns was non-existent, except for a small gender effect on the preferred reactions. The results regarding the appreciation of the living environment yielded a generally high degree of satisfaction among the detained youngsters on all three factor types. The assessment per living zone is represented by the sequence home – block – neighborhood – society, with decreasing degree of satisfaction. Compared with the normal group, the detained youngsters are less satisfied with their situation at home, in the block and in the neighborhood, but their evaluation at the level of society as a whole is more positive. It was also observed that the juvenile delinquents have a more negative perception of the strain factors than the normal youngsters, but no significant differences between both groups were found on the binding and ecological factors. The importance that the minor offenders attach to the factors is high in general terms, and the differences with the normal group are very small on this issue.

The results of the cross-cultural analysis, addressed through the comparative research questions, are presented in *chapter 8*. The aggregate reaction patterns of normal schoolgoing youngsters from Toluca coincide almost completely with the international standard picture, meaning that their global attitude towards social limits does not vary with respect to similar groups of

young people from other countries. However, a more detailed analysis of the preferred reactions per critical incident produced a more differentiated pattern: significant differences were obtained between the Mexican sample and the way Dutch, Belgian and German juveniles react on 6 incidents, indicating that cross-cultural variations do exist in the youngsters' behavioral inclinations in specific situations. The international comparison of samples of juvenile delinquents produced very clear differences between the Mexican youngsters on one hand, and the populations studied in the Netherlands, Belgium and Estonia on the other, especially in the preferred reactions. The minor offenders from the Quinta del Bosque are much less inclined towards overstepping limits, and much more towards adjusting. In fact, the global reaction patterns of the Mexican juvenile delinquents are completely consonant with the international standard picture of *normal* youngsters, and they do not show the typical and systematic deviations that had been found until now in juvenile delinquents from other countries. This is also reflected in the patterns by critical incident: significant differences were obtained in 8 situations, and in all of them the Mexican respondents expressed a greater inclination towards norm-following behavior than their Dutch and Flemish peers.

Chapter 9 contains the general conclusions and discussion of the national and cross-cultural issues related to the attitudes towards social limits of Mexican youngsters. Their global attitude is characterized by generalized knowledge of the adjustment and overstepping reaction types (cognitive aspect), attraction towards self- and here and now-directed motivations (affective aspect) and adjusting as the main behavioral intention (conative aspect). The global patterns do not reflect the collectivistic orientation of the Mexican culture in a direct way, through more other-directed motivations, but rather by more indirect and abstract references to rules, norms and values. The heterogeneity in the percentage distributions and sequences per critical incident is explained in terms of the different context of each situation, including the setting and the way other persons are involved, and the particular nature of the social limits. The general conclusion about the impact of age, gender and profession of the parents on the reaction patterns of Mexican youngsters is that the influence of these variables is non-existent or marginal. The satisfaction with the living environment was found to be highest in the most proximate setting (at home) and lowest in the most distant setting (society as a whole); this does not only coincide with findings of empirical Mexican studies on the subject, but also with data obtained in RPR-studies in other countries. The lowest degree of satisfaction per factor type was observed in the strain factors, especially at the level of society; this can be interpreted as an expression of the concern of young people in Mexico about the social and economic situation of the country.

The main topic that is addressed in the cross-cultural discussion refers to the global reaction patterns of Mexican juvenile delinquents, particularly the tendency to adopt norm-following behavior when they deal with social rules. This is completely different from previous RPR-findings on similar groups in other countries, where the reaction patterns had been characterized by significant and systematic inclinations towards overstepping social limits more frequently, compared with normal youngsters. This is explained partly by the organizational structure and treatment methods of the Quinta del Bosque, generating an identification process with the institution and with peer groups, and the adoption of norm-adjusting attitudes during their stay. A second explaining factor that is suggested is related to the characteristics of the detained youngsters, especially their socio-economic background. However, it is pointed out that the evidence is far from conclusive, and that this intent of explanation should rather be seen as a hypothesis that ought to be explored further in future research.

The implications and suggestions of the RPR-Mexico are presented in *chapter 10*. The methodological issues that are discussed include the sample procedures and characteristics, the instrument, data collection, coding, statistical analysis and validity. Some possible adaptations in the SRI are suggested for future research projects, and the need for an exhaustive review of the coding manual is stressed. The most important theoretical implications concern the attitude concept and the analysis of the reactions per critical incident. We consider that the distinction between a generic attitude towards social limits and specific attitudes towards single behaviors in particular situations may contribute to a better understanding of reaction patterns, as these are not only determined by a generic attitude towards rules, but also by the kind of social limit that is involved and by the physical and social context in which an event takes place. Therefore, an interactional perspective for analyzing young people's attitudes towards social limits is proposed, which should take into consideration three elements: the individual, the social limit and the situation. It is suggested that attention should be paid to the following issues in the future research program of the RPR: the attitude concept, incident by incident analyses, cross-cultural comparisons and the updating of the coding manual. As far as the RPR-Mexico is concerned, our suggestions are aimed at doing further research on the juvenile delinquents group; studying youngsters from several regions of the country; and analyzing the relation between rearing in the family and the children's attitudes towards social limits. In the field of youth care, the need for a consistent and integral national youth policy is argued, in order to tackle important problems as juvenile unemployment, educational demand and violence in a more efficient way. The suggestions for practical applications of the RPR are presented, directed mainly at the use of the SRI and/or ASL in the classroom at schools

and in the Quinta del Bosque, covering the domains of prevention, diagnosis and treatment.

La investigación de Patrones de Reacción (PR) se inició en 1980 en el Departamento de Psicología de la Universidad de Granada, España. Se centra en los patrones básicos de las actitudes de jóvenes hacia los hechos sociales, definidos como reglas, leyes, normas y expectativas del mundo ambiental, y en la coherencia entre estas reacciones actitudes y la estructura de casa, en el nivel de clase y en instituciones (residenciales) para el mundo juvenil (Kirk, 1989). Actualmente, la IPR constituye un programa internacional de investigación que se está desarrollando en una veintena de universidades de América Latina, España, México, Colombia, Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panamá, Paraguay, Perú, Uruguay, Venezuela y Zaire. Desde su inicio, la comunidad científica a la IPR, reportando los hallazgos respecto a las actitudes de jóvenes de cultura española a través del "Standard Reaction Inventory" (SRI), que fue diseñado específicamente para la medición de patrones de reacción de jóvenes en el manejo de hechos sociales. El objeto de la investigación incluye tanto a jóvenes "normales" (sin problemas graves de conducta y contacto con la justicia) como a delincuentes juveniles. A lo largo de los diez capítulos se abordan aspectos teóricos y metodológicos, se describen las expectativas de la investigación, se describen y se discuten los resultados y se presentan las implicaciones y sugerencias.

El capítulo I presenta una introducción general a la IPR. Sus objetivos son definir como investigar las actitudes de jóvenes hacia los hechos sociales, establecer comparaciones transculturales de los patrones de reacciones y desarrollar instrumentos que puedan ser utilizados en escuelas y centros de atención juvenil, en los ámbitos de prevención, diagnóstico y tratamiento. Se explica el concepto de "actitud", y parte de la premisa que una conducta refleja procesos cognitivos, afectivos y conductivos. En la IPR, el concepto de actitud ha sido operacionalizado mediante la medición de reacciones cognitivas, reacciones previas y motivaciones, y la estimación de la especificidad del mundo ambiental por el joven respecto de 13 hechos sociales pertenecientes a tres tipos: factuales de relación ecológica y de unión. En la descripción de las reacciones se distinguen tres niveles: (A) reacciones